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21-nation conference on drug war starts

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WASHINGTON — Part diplomacy, part media event and part demonstration of political clout, a 21-nation anti-drug conference sponsored by Florida Sen. Paula Hawkins got under way Thursday with calls for international cooperation to stop drug trafficking.



Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, FBI Director William Webster and Administrator Francis Mullen of the Drug Enforcement Administration headed a cast of heavyweights in describing for the delegates the depth of the American effort to stop drugs.

"Sister nations must join hands in this effort if there is any hope for success," said Hawkins.

The two-day meeting, called the Western Hemisphere Conference on Narcotics Control, included representatives from key nations in the drug supply chain, such as Bolivia, Colombia, Panama, Mexico and the Bahamas.

It was the outgrowth of Hawkins' one-woman diplomatic campaign against drugs. She has traveled to 12 countries during the past four years, telling Chinese Communists and Latin strongmen that the extent of their efforts to curb the flow of drugs would have an impact on relations with the United States. The State Department credits the Republican senator with helping to get China to shut off exportation of Quaaludes.

Thursday's conference dealt heavily with enforcement, but the underlying message was that the drug addiction problem is not exclusively American.

"A country with the problem of producing drugs ultimately becomes a consumer," said the FBI's Webster.

Mullen of the DEA said international cooperation in anti-drug efforts has grown in recent years. He praised Colombia's extradition of accused drug dealers to the United States in the face of threatened reprisals and Mexico's efforts to wipe out the marijuana crop by aerial spraying.

Weinberger, who put in a brief appearance, said the Pentagon is willing to help all it can in supplying intelligence information to law enforcement agencies about the movement of suspicious boats and airplanes.

The conference participants offered few suggestions of their own. Hawkins said a closed session today may produce more frank discussion.

One participant, Bolivian Ambassador Mariano Baptista, rebutted criticism by Hawkins that his country is not doing enough to stop the cultivation of the coca leaf, from which cocaine is derived.

"We are doing much more than she realizes," Baptista said.

The problem is, he said, that the drug dealers have more money than his government. He said the government operation to capture cocaine king Roberto Suarez had to be called off because there was no gasoline for the pursuit vehicles.

Baptista appealed for American aid in the drug war. He suggested that some of the cash confiscated from drug dealers here be used to help Latin countries in their enforcement efforts.

Van Edsall, executive director of Miami Citizens Against Crime, who attended as an observer, said the meeting was useful. But Edsall urged that a greater stress be placed on the common social problem of drug abuse, and less on the logistics of enforcement.

"There's too much leaning on [the matter of] supply," he said. "That's like telling them, 'You've got to help us with our problem.' The real theme should be: 'Hey, we all have a problem. Let's figure out how to get people to stop using drugs.'"